

# What Makes a (Harvard) Classic? Filling Dr Eliot's Five-Foot Shelf in 1909

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**Abstract** Drawing attention to a forgotten controversy, this article describes the furious nationwide response to an inaccurate advance list of the contents of the forthcoming Harvard Classics that circulated across the United States in June 1909. The conversation about this list offers a rich trove of evidence for historians of reading: commentators express views about good and bad reading, the proper curriculum of a liberal education, and criteria for the status of “classic.” Especially in their attention to the perceived omissions of Shakespeare and the Bible from the set, these responses contradict simple, unidirectional accounts of “high” and “low” culture. Instead, this controversy shows Americans of the early twentieth century invoking a “classic” at once accessibly ubiquitous and highly prestigious: their commentary about the contents of the Harvard Classics presumes a relationship between elite authority and the broader reading public that is complex and reciprocal.

**Key words:** Harvard Classics, Charles W. Eliot, Five-Foot Shelf, reading

The Harvard Classics stand as one of the great successes of twentieth-century American publishing. Launched in 1909 under the official editorship of the outgoing President of Harvard University, Charles W. Eliot, the series was popularly known as “Dr Eliot’s Five-Foot Shelf” or simply “The Five-Foot Shelf.”<sup>1</sup> The pitch was compelling: read for just fifteen minutes a day from these fifty volumes, advertisements promised, and you will gain the equivalent of a liberal education. Locating the series within American practices of “reading up,” Amy Blair points to one of its distinctive features: “the Five-Foot Shelf,” she observes, “was remarkable for its fixity: the contents of the collection did not change at all over its fifty-year publication history” (Blair 195).

That long, lucrative steadiness belies an unsettled beginning. At the moment of their launch, the Harvard Classics were in fact noteworthy for the instability of their contents, which became the subject of nationwide controversy. During the early months when the publisher, Collier's, worked with Eliot to prepare the series, newspapers and magazines across the United States featured heated commentary on the question: what would this set of classics include? Which texts would be consecrated by association with the names of Eliot and Harvard, graced by the status of "classic," and thus placed among the essentials of a twentieth-century liberal education?

This article does not discuss Eliot's answers to these questions, nor explain his definition of "classic," nor explore how the Harvard Classics enact his arguments about liberal education. In an important sense, this article is not about the Harvard Classics at all. What it examines instead is the nationwide response to an inaccurate list of this set's contents that circulated in June 1909. Rather than analyzing Eliot's thought, I investigate the ideas articulated in this discussion about the Harvard Classics during its troubled early weeks, before the set existed in its magisterially fixed final form. This controversy produced a remarkable number of responses, often allocated front-page space. In their passion, prominence, and sheer volume, these responses demand our attention. Though they tell us little about the makeup of the actual Harvard Classics, they offer a valuable window onto reading practices and ideas about reading in early twentieth-century America.

In voicing their complaints about Eliot's ostensible selections, his critics express fervent views and quiet assumptions about what makes a "classic," what a liberal education ought to be, and what constitutes good reading; more interestingly still, they sometimes report on the actual reading habits and preferences of readers whom they know. The controversy over the contents of the Harvard Classics thus generates a trove of evidence for historians of reading. This article begins by staging the circumstances of this controversy, then surveys a range of commentary on the interest and utility of the purported selections, and closes by focusing on responses that specifically address the perceived omissions of Shakespeare and the Bible. Collectively, this national conversation helps us to see American readers in

1909 expressing an understanding of “classics” that finds no contradiction between ubiquity and high status. Demanding accessibility and prestige at once, these readers posit a relationship between everyday learners and elite authority that confounds any simple hierarchical account of “high” and “low” culture.

## **Teacher, Orator, Administrator, Prophet**

Harvard University’s Commencement exercises of 1909, culminating on 30 June, saw an especially large number of attendees: over 900 degrees were awarded, and alumni gathered enthusiastically for their class dinners (“The End of the Year,” 50). The year’s ceremonies marked a great change: the preceding May, after a long reign of four decades, having refashioned Harvard into a modern university, transformed the liberal arts curriculum, and shaped education policy across the nation, President Eliot had retired. “The President Emeritus the Centre of Attention at Commencement,” announced the *New York Times* feature on the proceedings. Reporting that “thousands of alumni gathered” for the events, the *Times* described the scene: “The green lawns of the elm-shaded yard were thronged with graduates, students, teachers, and parents and friends of the graduating class. The weather was all that could be desired” (“Harvard Gives Eliot Two Honor Degrees”).

In this verdant scene of triumph and congratulation, Eliot was made Emeritus and awarded honorary doctorates in both Medicine and Law. Rumors circulated that a gift fund for him, glutted with alumni and undergraduate subscriptions, had risen as high as \$100,000, or perhaps even \$500,000.00 (“Eliot May Get \$500,000.00 Gift”; \$500,000.00 for Dr Eliot?”). As he conferred upon the former president a Doctor of Laws, Eliot’s successor Abbott Lawrence Lowell hailed his far-reaching influence and monumental public stature: “Teacher, administrator, orator, prophet, forty years the leader and guide of Harvard, and in the single-minded elevation of his character a model to her sons; the father of the present American university, the brother of all teachers, and the friend of every lover of his country” (“Harvard Gives Eliot Two Honor Degrees”). With the soft spring weather, the fulsome praise, the abundant honors, the generous gifts, and the sterling record of forty

years behind him, the Commencement proceedings of 1909 ought to have brought Eliot unmixed satisfaction. But one vulgar misstep marred the scene.

“Every Harvard graduate was surprised after the commencement yesterday,” the *Times* reported in a front-page story dated 1 July, “to receive an announcement from the New York publishers of the issuance of books in ‘Harvard crimson’ binding”; *Publishers Weekly* soon picked up the story too (“Paid Eliot for His Library”; “Collier’s Paid”). It was true: the alumni gathered convivially at Harvard for the Commencement proceedings were apparently given an item that could only be described as *advertising*. The merchandise advertised was the Harvard Classics—not yet extant, but available for advance purchase by subscription. The announcement, printed on thick paper, featured promotional text from Collier’s, as well as a statement from Eliot that had also been published in the 12 June issue of their house magazine, *Collier’s Weekly*. Eliot’s statement declares: “It is my belief that the faithful and considerate reading of these books... will give any man the essentials of a liberal education, if he can devote to them but fifteen minutes a day.” The publisher’s text, however, focuses on the materiality of the set, promising high-quality illustrations and bindings that offer “a rich, simple effect in Harvard crimson” (“President Eliot’s ‘Five-foot Shelf of Books’”).

To Eliot, this crude eruption of commerce into the elevated activities of Commencement may have felt like the culmination of a longer sequence of frustrating embarrassments. He addressed these embarrassments on the evening of 1 July, the day following Commencement, when he apparently offered a statement for the press. On the subject of the Harvard Classics, Eliot sought to set the record straight. He clarified that the contents of the set were not yet determined, and also defended the financial terms of his arrangement with Collier’s, saying: “I felt that if my name as a compiler of the list induced people to read the books a great educational work would have been done. My position in this matter is thoroughly understood by all who know me” (“Paid Eliot for His Library”; see also “Eliot Admits” and “Collier’s Paid”). But clearly, that understanding was all too rare: it was because of widespread misunderstanding that Eliot needed to make this statement.

During the preceding two weeks, the former President had suffered significant difficulty and discomfort. A brutal heatwave settled on New England, imposing “ten days of scorching, sizzling weather, the kind that resulted in scores of deaths and hundreds of prostrations in Boston and other cities” until it broke at last with a three-hour late afternoon downpour on the 29th (“Comfortable Day at Last”). During the suffocating days leading up to the Commencement, the “father of the American university” had borne an extraordinary onslaught of attention, much of it derisive or vitriolic, from newspapers and magazines nationwide, as well as individuals who saw fit to write to him personally.

The matter began with a theft. During the night of Tuesday, 15 June, enterprising student journalists for the *Harvard Crimson*, whose previous requests for information had been rebuffed, burgled the editorial offices of the Harvard Classics, temporarily established on campus. Their prize was a list of contents. They published their purloined list on Wednesday the 16th under the headline “Mr. Eliot Selects ‘Harvard Classics,’” purporting to name “the selections as far as have been made.” Boston and New York papers picked up the story the next day, and by the following week, as temperatures surged, coverage and commentary on Eliot’s selections was roaring through the press nationwide.

Most of this coverage reprinted the contents of the *Crimson* article, which itself reprinted in full the statement from Eliot that appeared on the Announcement to Alumni and the 12 June issue of *Collier’s Weekly*. The *Crimson*’s list gives the ostensible contents of each of the first five volumes, and then presents a jumble of authors and titles with an indication that “though not yet arranged,” they will appear in the remaining volumes. The numerous reprints of this content from the *Crimson* generally eliminate this detail and simply provide a single list of all the given titles. Depending on how one counts, the list names roughly 40 works and 34 authors, ranging from ancient to contemporary—including, for example, Plato, Marcus Aurelius, and Augustine, but also Dante, Chaucer, Bunyan, and a slew of early modern dramatists as well as Adam Smith, Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alfred Tennyson, and Charles Darwin.<sup>2</sup> The intensity and breadth of

the furore that this list provoked across the United States are evident in Eliot's responses to it: in addition to offering comments to the *Times* on the evening of 1 July, he would also take up the matter in writing.

After the heat broke and Commencement concluded, Eliot headed north, taking up residence at his shingle-style summer home on the shore of Northeast Harbor in Asticou, Maine. Once settled there, he composed a letter to Collier's. A version of his letter, dated 10 July, appeared later that month in *Collier's Weekly*, along with another statement from the publisher. The printed letter repeats the gist of his 1 July remarks to the press. With characteristic froideur, Eliot declares: "The recent discussions in the public press and in private conversation over 'the five-foot shelf of books' satisfy me that the project had [sic] not been correctly apprehended in some quarters. The incomplete and inaccurate list which appeared in the newspapers a few weeks ago was published without my knowledge, and gives an erroneous impression of the project." Eliot goes on to explain that, as yet, "not more than half of the books have been decided on" ("Five Feet of Books").

Eliot's cool reserve finds a complement in the more pugnacious defense offered by the publisher's accompanying statement, which notes that "the publication of an incomplete and inaccurate list" has elicited "some 'silly season' editorials" and "wordy symposia concerning books," and disparages "the mass of criticism, restrained, violent, flippant, or merely dull, which followed the publication of the supposed list" ("Five Feet of Books"). Like the stolen list itself, Eliot's July statement made the news and was widely reprinted. The publicity was, of course, a boon, and Collier's deftly cultivated it. But their commercial canniness alone cannot account for the avid interest evident in the sheer volume of the coverage.

That avidity and that volume may have derived partly from a more general unrest. Joseph Kett's history of self-education observes a shifting environment around the turn of the century: "By the early 1900s," Kett writes, "culture itself was in decline as the goal of popular adult education" (143). That decline had implications for Eliot's project, which—in its earliest days at least—expressed a distinctly Victorian dedication to the project of culture. Institutional higher education was no less unsettled at the moment of the

Harvard Classics' launch. Laurence Veysey asserts that "the years 1908, 1909, and 1910 witnessed the widest flurry of debate about the aims of higher education ever to occur in the United States"; pointing to "a remarkable degree of confusion," he writes that "a rising mood of ferment and self-questioning occurred, especially during the year 1909." Turning to the former President of Harvard specifically, Veysey observes: "Eliot for one seems to have imagined that after the American university had been created, a task for a single generation, everyone could simply enjoy the result in a kind of static utopia. If such was the prophecy, it proved thoroughly wrong" (252–53). In spring 1909, in the matter of institutional reforms and also in the launch of his Five-Foot Shelf, Eliot did not quite foresee the challenges to come: the father of the American university was caught off guard.

## Dr Eliot's Critics

"There's quite a gush of fault finding with Dr. Eliot's small book shelf," a New Hampshire newspaper observed on 21 June. Rather empathetically, the paper noted that "he is criticized for including some books which are rarely read and for leaving out some books which everybody is supposed to read or ought to read" ("Dr Eliot's Bookshelf").<sup>3</sup> Surveying the nationwide conversation on the subject several weeks later, a San Jose (California) newspaper affirmed: "There is great and natural interest in Dr Eliot's 'five-foot library'... Scores of editorials and letters have already appeared in which alleged omissions are criticized." In this abundance of criticism, the paper's commentator saw an ulterior motive: "One cannot avoid the suspicion that the ... critics are more anxious to display their own literary breadth and knowledge than to vindicate the alleged immortals against the tacit disparagement of Dr Eliot" ("Why Not Wait"). Whatever their motives, those who responded to the circulated list of contents, as well as the journalists who assiduously reported on their commentary, left us a wealth of information. Now readily accessible in digital form, the conversation about Eliot's list gives us an opportunity to observe early twentieth-century Americans discussing books, reading, education, and the nature of a "classic."

One of the suggestive patterns that emerges in the coverage concerns libraries and their patrons. Multiple stories report that librarians, upon learning of the list, set up exhibits on their premises featuring the titles named. The report from San Jose notes that “some librarians have already installed the recommended set of books as ‘special exhibits’ in order to see how many readers will take the prescribed course” (“Why Not Wait”; see also “‘Edits’ Book List” and “Y.M.C.A.”). Library patrons did not rush to take up the books. In fact, newspaper coverage eagerly documents both indifference and disapproval. One Missouri paper reported: “Evidently St Louis is not very keen on Dr. Eliot’s list of good reading. The book and department stores are not having any great demand for the volumes named, and the libraries are not overworked to get them out.” “At the Public Library,” the article specifies, “attendants said... there was no clamorous demand for them” (“Dr Eliot’s Book List Not Liked by St Louisans”). Similar accounts came from New York City librarians: calculating that their patrons (not including those in Brooklyn) used more than 9,000,000 books each year, they determined that “in that immense total there are only four books on Dr Eliot’s list for which there is any considerable demand. The four are ‘Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin,’ Adam Smith’s ‘Wealth of Nations,’ Emerson’s ‘Essays,’ and Bacon’s ‘Essays’” (“Dr Eliot’s Odd List”).

Such complaints went well beyond the walls of the library. Many observed that Eliot’s selections were difficult, boring, or otherwise unappealing. Derisive attention focused in particular on one title on the list, the 1774 autobiography of the Quaker abolitionist John Woolman. The *Washington Post*, picking up a story from the *New York World*, quoted “a veteran bookseller” who said: “I have been selling books for 50 years. I haven’t had a call for Woolman in 40 years.” The same article quotes Leigh H. Hunt, critic, art historian, and professor at City College, New York: “To read Woolman now,” Hunt opines, “is a waste of time... Of course, for the dilettante, with time to read everything, it will do well enough.” Hunt’s objections did not stop there; he added: “Dr Eliot was almost foolish to put in Dryden’s ‘All for Love.’ Why does he call for all of Milton? To read ‘Paradise Regained’ after ‘Paradise Lost’ gives you that great disappointment of an anticlimax that a boy gets from reading the



sequel to 'Monte Cristo' after his delight in the first book" ("Dr Eliot's Odd List").

The erudite Professor Hunt's apparently intimate familiarity with these titles does nothing to contradict the judgment expressed the following week by the *New York Outlook*: "A glance at the books chosen will make it apparent that Dr Eliot proposes no easy course; and that, although the reading of these books is elective, it will not be what is known in college slang as a 'soft snap'" ("Dr Eliot's Shelf of Books"). Others objected not so much to the academic orientation or the difficulty of the texts as the paucity of modern, scientific, or technical material: surveying local citizens, the *Missouri paper* found several who objected to the excessively "philosophical" character of the list, and its lack of "practical" utility ("Dr Eliot's Book List Not Liked by St Louisans"). These criticisms are noteworthy in that they affirm that a "liberal education" should also be a "practical" one.

It is ironic that Eliot should suffer criticism on this account: he was in fact a great supporter of professional training, and perhaps the nation's most influential advocate for bringing the natural sciences into the liberal arts curriculum. But, especially in coverage outside New York and Boston, a great deal of the commentary on his list bristles against the authority of the elite East Coast Dr Eliot, and occasionally delights in his humiliation. Despite their rapt, sustained attention to his pronouncements on the question of what constitutes a "classic," Americans did not shy from irreverence as they claimed their right to answer that question themselves. Broadly speaking, their answers tend to demand a liberal education that is oriented towards the demands of modern work, and a roster of classics at once enjoyably engaging and rigorously aspirational.

## **The Bible and Shakespeare**

Such mingled criteria for inclusion find expression in a refrain that appears throughout criticism of the leaked list: commentators repeatedly focus on Eliot's apparent omission of Shakespeare and the Bible. In a front-page headline just below its masthead, the *Times's* first coverage of the list announced: "ELIOT NAMES BOOKS FOR 5-FOOT LIBRARY: Some of the 25 Volumes That,

Well Read, Would Give a Liberal Education: SHAKESPEARE IS NOT IN IT” (“Eliot Names Books”). That headline aside, criticism of these two omissions tended to group them together as a pair, as if they were a single self-evidently connected unit. The New Hampshire paper mentioned “books which everybody is supposed to read or ought to read, like the Bible and Shakespeare” (“Dr Eliot’s Bookshelf”). A Christian periodical of Louisville (Kentucky) observed, “It was not to be expected that this list would exactly suit everyone, but Dr Eliot is being severely criticized for the omission of two books which in most minds should head every list of this kind—the English Bible and Shakespeare” (“Dr Eliot’s Five-Foot Book Shelf”).

The *Washington Post* described such minds more specifically, suggesting that this strain of criticism belonged to those with professional authority in the literary realm: “‘Will Dr Eliot omit Shakespeare and the Bible?’ was the question put by many when asked for comments on the partial list of books... the omission was noted by professors, writers, booksellers, and librarians” (“Dr Eliot’s Odd List”). But coverage in the *New York Times* suggested that this perspective did not belong to those authorities alone: the paper reported that at the library of the West Side Branch of the YMCA, where librarians had set up an exhibition of the listed titles, “the men who frequent the library have been much interested in Dr Eliot’s plan, and when the list was announced there was considerable comment”: one man “described his fellow-readers as ‘frothing at the mouth’ in anger at the omission of the Bible and Shakespeare” (“Y.M.C.A.”).

Eliot’s response to this rabid discontent was swift. He first addressed the complaint about Shakespeare and the Bible in his remarks to the press after Commencement on 1 July, before leaving for Asticou. He told reporters: “The Bible and Shakespeare were omitted from the list at the suggestion of the publisher. The reason, of course, is that most people have read the Bible and Shakespeare.” Eliot added that space simply did not permit the inclusion of these texts in his limited number of volumes: “any good edition of Shakespeare would take five volumes. The Bible would take three volumes, and there will be eight gone out of the fifty” (“Paid Eliot for His Library”; see also “Eliot Admits” and “Collier’s Paid”). Eliot addressed complaints about these

particular omissions again in his published letter dated 10 July, which states: “The Bible and Shakespeare are omitted because these books are within the reach of most Americans who read at all” (“Five Feet of Books”). When the *New York Times* reported on that published letter, it gave special prominence to this line, announcing in a subtitle that Eliot had “Omitted the Bible and Shakespeare Because Every Reader Is Supposed to Have Them” (“Dr. Eliot Defends ‘5-Foot Shelf’”).

Parts of the Bible and of Shakespeare’s oeuvre would in fact appear in the actual Harvard Classics, the true contents of which were publicized in *Collier’s Weekly* in April 1910. Nevertheless, as late as June of that year, Eliot was attacked for not including “Shakespeare’s works or the Bible” in a University of Chicago convocation address (“Attacks Eliot’s Classics”). That address extended a local pattern that dated back to the preceding year: the reception of the Harvard Classics in Chicago was especially hostile.

The *Chicago Daily Tribune* documented this hostility with diligent zeal, giving ample coverage to criticism. As Eliot’s published statements of self-defense circulated during July 1909, the paper printed a letter dated 2 July from the writer Slason Thompson. Declaring that “it is to be hoped that President Emeritus Eliot reverses his decision to exclude the bible and Shakespeare from the fifty books he is selecting for the ideal five foot shelf of books,” he affirms that “no book shelf, however practical or ideal, however limited or comprehensive, can pretend to completeness without both of these inestimable volumes.” Thompson enters into detailed numerical calculations in order to show that the fifty volumes could in fact comfortably accommodate these works. Pleading with lyricism as well as arithmetic, he writes that “the value” of the Bible and Shakespeare “is continuous, and though man were to live while light dispels darkness they must continue the indispensable lamps of English literature and human philosophy” (Thompson).

The *Tribune* also reported on a July 1909 sermon titled “Why Was the Bible Omitted from Dr Eliot’s Five Foot Shelf?” by minister Hugh T. Kerr. Prior to giving his sermon, Kerr had written personally to Eliot and received a reply from Asticou, dated 9 July, sharing content with Eliot’s letter to *Collier’s* and

evidently composed around the same time. Eliot wrote to the Reverend: “The bible and Shakespeare were excluded from my five foot shelf of books by the publishers on the ground that almost every American who reads at all owns those books.” Kerr responded in his sermon: “Dr Eliot gives the bible a unique place... its peculiarity consists in being owned by every one who reads. Dr Eliot omits Shakespeare for the same reason, but where there is one who reads the greatest of the poets, hundreds read the bible” (“Edits’ Book List”).

This observation about the relative popularity of Shakespeare and the Bible offers a view on the relationship between religious and secular reading practices. In early twentieth-century America, however, both Shakespeare’s works and the Bible could elicit modes of reading that might be called devotional. Kerr’s sermon notably endorses a rather secular way of reading scripture: “The bible,” he declares, “is not a fetish to be ignorantly worshiped, but a literature to be studied and enjoyed.” For Kerr, such study and enjoyment are the objects of the project of liberal learning that Eliot’s list proposes. He affirms: “From an educational standpoint the bible would have been the most valuable in the collection” (“Edits’ Book List”).

The distinctive pattern of hostility to the Harvard Classics in Chicago might be understood within the interpretive frameworks that describe elite “cultural custodians” from Boston and New York seeking to control the democratic masses, or observe a “genteel tradition” imposing its sterile and desiccated “culture” upon Americans across the nation. More broadly, one might be tempted to regard the explosive response to the Harvard Classics as a story of conflict between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” approaches to culture. As Joan Shelley Rubin and Janice Radway have suggested, it is more specifically accurate to understand the series as an early event in the history of the “middlebrow,”<sup>3</sup> but I would suggest that the national uproar about the Harvard Classics in fact helps us to understand better the limitations of all of these terms and frameworks for thinking about the actual workings of culture, education, and power.

Rubin points to these limitations in her 2014 reassessment of Lawrence W. Levine’s *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (1988). Levine’s study is especially relevant here because one of its chief interests is the status of Shakespeare in the

United States, and the degree to which that author's work functioned as "high art," the prestigious and exclusive property of an elite (11–82). Asking "what have we learned over the last twenty-five years about cultural hierarchy in America?" Rubin brings scholarship from book history to interrogate Levine's influential and generative argument that a "'bifurcation' of 'serious' and 'popular' culture" begins "as early as the middle of the nineteenth century," widening and hardening by 1900 into a division "between highbrow and lowbrow," with Shakespeare firmly on the highbrow side of the divide, exemplifying a "sacralized" culture belonging to the exclusively to the elite (5, 8).

Mustering more up-to-date scholarship by Katherine West Scheil, Leslie Butler, and others, Rubin argues that the classification of Shakespeare as high culture "is not incompatible with democratic ideals if it is linked to processes of dissemination aimed at making art widely accessible." Pushing back against unidirectional accounts of cultural hierarchy, she notes that "a process of desacralization—a movement in the direction of high to popular—was operating alongside sacralization." Noting that others have pointed to this multidirectional complexity, she quotes David D. Hall's early criticism of *Highbrow/Lowbrow*: "The making and remaking of culture seem too dynamic and elusive to permit control by an elite that was never really unified, while what is designated as democracy is... always marked by forms of high and low" (11; see also Hall).

The evidence of the June 1909 controversy about the Harvard Classics corroborates Hall's insight. Readers across the nation affirmed the quotidian familiarity of Shakespeare even as they argued for his elite consecration. To them, apparently, that was no contradiction: the criteria for the status of "classic" could include both accessible ubiquity and high prestige. In examining this controversy, we do not find a cultural custodian imperiously dispensing "high" culture downward to lower masses. Instead, American responses to the list, along with Eliot's own rebuttals to those responses, show a reciprocal exchange between an elite authority and a self-consciously democratic body of readers. The elite authority himself has democratic views; the public he addresses feels richly entitled to elite learning. If

there are “high” and “low” elements in the patterns of reading evoked in this conversation, those elements are often mutually constitutive or overlapping.

When Eliot observed that “the Bible and Shakespeare” were “within the reach of most Americans who read at all,” and that “almost every American who reads at all owns those books,” Americans concurred; as the New Hampshire newspaper put it, these were “books which everybody is supposed to read or ought to read” (“Five Feet of Books”; “Edits’ Book List”; “Dr Eliot’s Bookshelf”). That, according to them, was precisely what earned these books a place in the Five-Foot Shelf. A book “within reach of most Americans,” one that “everybody” had read was manifestly suitable for consecration as a “classic” bound in rich crimson. Ubiquity, accessibility, and familiarity should not dictate exclusion from the set; on the contrary, these responses suggest, those qualities in fact specifically recommended these works for inclusion.

Insisting upon the dignity and wisdom of the Harvard Classics’ prospective readers, these responses imagine that those readers have been engaged in a project of learning, and Eliot’s set merely legitimates, facilitates, and extends that endeavor. These responses manifest aspiration and a measure of deference to Eliot’s authority, but that deference is tempered by a confidence in knowledge previously gained, and that aspiration does not deny the value of what’s already known—known by “everybody.”

The democratic principle expressed in this view was one cherished by Eliot, too, and it informed his efforts to broaden access to liberal education by publishing the Five-Foot Shelf. His endeavor’s long and lucrative success suggests that many Americans agreed with Eliot: the classics, they believed, belonged properly to everybody. And yet: whom does that “everybody” include? When we look beyond June 1909 to the longer story of the Harvard Classics, this question looms. The controversy about inclusion in the contents of the set is merely a beginning, and it points towards controversies about inclusion in the democratic citizenry.

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## Notes

1. The Harvard Classics are part of a larger phenomenon: on "libraries," "classics," and series in the US and Britain during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Domeneghini; Spiers; Hammond (Ch. 3: 85–115); Jailant; Lacy; Satterfield; and Schurman. On the earlier phases of this form, see Ezell.

2. All but one of the 34 authors on the *Crimson's* incomplete list would eventually appear in the actual Harvard Classics; in some cases, those authors are represented by works other than those on the list. See Radway 145–47, and Rubin 27–29; see also Blair 195–97.
3. The phrase “books which everybody is supposed to read or ought to read” is not a redundancy: this is not the idiomatic usage (more common in US English) in which “is supposed to” implies “should.” Rather, here and in other material quoted in this article, “is supposed to” denotes “is believed to”: the phrase refers to reading already happening, rather than aspiration or obligation to read.

## About the author

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